

In recent weeks, we have introduced in a series of sermons what we believe to be God's direction for our congregation. We began with where we are – no, not the Dairy Queen in Lafayette, Alabama, but a historic congregation in Savannah, placed right in the middle of God's expansive mission to bring the nations into His embrace before the Second Coming of Christ. We examined the lives of Daniel and his compatriots and their deep commitment to knowing Christ; Gideon and his pursuit of growing in Christ; and Jonah and his call to go in the name of Christ. Last weekend Greg Speck challenged us in our identity as a Great Commission Parish, which incorporates the elements of knowing, growing, and going at its heart, as well as its practical application from faithful human sexuality to overcoming depression.

Over the past several years, we have found ourselves in a whirlwind of upheaval and turmoil, stemming from various actions of The Episcopal Church in denying or refusing to acknowledge basic Christian tenets such as the authority of Holy Scripture, the identity of Jesus Christ as God's only Son and His unique provision for salvation, and the necessity of Christ's death on the Cross for our redemption. These disturbing elements are not only a part of The Episcopal Church, but symptomatic of a cultural and societal shift that has been underway for at least two generations, affecting many so-called "main-line" denominations. As a whole, we discovered (with various degrees of shock and dismay) that we have been asleep at our post, and sensed a call to awaken and re-affirm the "faith once delivered to the saints." For us, it was a decision no longer to drift downstream toward the waterfall of spiritual destruction and unbelief, but to remain faithful to what and who we have always been. Nevertheless, any of us who have sought to stand firm in the middle of a rushing stream know the effort and energy needed to withstand the current. It has been a time of pain and difficulty for some. We don't understand why we can't simply "all get along"; we are confused and bewildered by the use of similar religious phrases and terms that have different, even contradictory meanings – even words like "Jesus," "salvation," or "reconciliation" no longer can be taken at face value. We have to do the extra work of asking others (and perhaps ourselves) "What do we mean by that?" We have been confronted by friends or acquaintances and have sometimes felt inadequate in explaining our own faith or the convictions of our parish. Some of us have lost friends – long-time friends – or we have made the awkward truce of "not talking about church" with those we love. Some of us, especially our leadership, are tired. While the average person in the pew may deal with these unfortunate matters on an occasional basis, your staff and vestry are immersed in these matters almost every day, and it can feel like trying to swim through peanut butter.

But at the same time, this season has been exhilarating. Coming under godly and faithful leadership has been refreshing. Having Bishop Guernsey and Archbishop Orombi come to teach and be with us for significant periods of time was an immeasurable gift. Being connected with Anglicans throughout the world, and particularly our involvement in the historic gathering known as the Global Anglican Future Conference this last summer in Jerusalem, continues to produce fruit and spiritual blessings. Our engagement in the Anglican Alliance, a consortium of 24 Anglican parishes throughout north Florida and south Georgia, has provide me and our parish leadership with godly fellowship, increased resources, and a practical expression of what a faithful Anglican Province in North America might look like in our region. The spiritual awakening that is coursing throughout every inhabited continent, but has yet to reach our own shores, may very well find its way to us through these people and structures. What an exciting opportunity to be Christ's followers in these times! And God continues to be present with us.

I hear of those who do not know Christ as Savior and Lord coming into the loving and saving embrace of God, of broken hearts being healed by God's grace, of answered prayer, and numerous other stories in this parish of the Holy Spirit's life-transforming love. And now is the time to be clear and committed to knowing Christ, growing in Christ, and going in the name of Christ. So let's wrap up this series about who we are and where God seems to be taking us...

First and foremost, we are Christians

- We affirm God's loving nature and His infinite compassion, and we acknowledge that the purpose of human life is to enjoy a full and loving relationship with God.

- We acknowledge with great pain and sorrow our condition as sinners, both in our active disobedience and our passive neglect of all that a holy God expects of us. This sin separates us from God and is deserving of His wrath and judgment.
- We celebrate with great joy the gift of salvation in God's Son, Jesus Christ. His virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and ascension to God's right hand in glory all come together to offer us new life by repentance and faith in Him.
- We delight in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that glorifies the Son, who opens our hearts to Him, and who fills us with His presence. It is the Spirit that opens our eyes to understand the Bible and empowers us to live out its precepts. It is the Spirit that gives us gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ and of binding us together in Christian love for the service of God's kingdom.
- All of this we learn from the testimony of Holy Scripture, which we affirm as our primary and central authority, trustworthy in all that it affirms, and able to encourage us, guide us, inform and inspire us.

Second, we are Anglicans

- We cherish a creedal Christianity, which affirms a faith that has been given "once for all" to the saints (as stated in Jude). The three historic Creeds – Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian – summarize for us the essential elements of the Christian Faith, and we value the discipline of reciting one of those Creeds in almost every worship service we offer.
- We appreciate the historic Prayer Books. We are therefore committed to liturgical worship which involves a written and ancient form of worship coupled with simple but historic rituals and ceremonies that connect us with Anglican Christians throughout the world and throughout all ages. We wish to be informed by a historic Faith, and we recognize we are a part of a Church, a portion of which now resides and worships in heaven, a portion of which now resides and worships on this earth, and a portion of which will come after us to continue to worship in generations yet to come, if the Lord tarries. This gives us a profound perspective, and contributes to our humility as well as our hope.
- We are committed to a church that is further defined by the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion. This document, though set in a different historical context than our own (the 17th century), puts forth truths that transcends any given historical framework, for they are so crafted from Holy Scripture and tested by the fire of reformation zeal and conviction that they are for us a solid framework from which we can continue to bear witness to the unchanging truth of the Gospel, regardless of our immediate cultural context.

Third, we are a congregation that pursues a corporate life of knowing Christ, growing in Christ, and going in the name of Christ.

Our recent sermon series on our congregational vision has taken the great challenges of our present calling along with the complexities of our own parish, and sought to reduce our common life together to these three simple pursuits. If anyone asks you, "What is Christ Church about?" Here is your answer. We are about knowing Christ, growing in Christ, and going in the name of Christ.

The great challenge for us all is to digest this simple pattern. We cannot afford to slap a bunch of sticky-notes on a wall, fill up several sheets of newsprint, come up with a catchy mission statement, and file it away in some cabinet, never to be heard from again. The world is too difficult and the call of God upon us too challenging to play that game. This vision has come through arduous prayer and a focused pursuit of God's own design for us. These three little words – knowing, growing, and going – will become the lens through which the leadership of this parish will ask the tough questions and make the difficult decisions that will face us in the future. Christ Church is not called to be all things to all people. Such an enterprise will result in frustration and failure. But we are called to know Christ, to grow in Him, and to go forth in His name. If we cannot see an immediate and fruitful connection between a certain activity and these three pursuits, then perhaps we need as a congregation to lay that activity aside.

As you probably have noticed, there is a progression to these words, a kind of movement. Knowing Christ flows into growing in Christ which flows into going in the name of Christ. There is a plenty of overlap and back-and-forth, but essentially, we see this vision has having an inherent movement within it, which translates into a congregational movement toward a fuller and healthier parish.

Knowing Christ in a corporate sense comes from our worship together. Of course, in order to know Christ as a Body we need to know Christ in our own hearts, and the Gospel will always be put front and center with a call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Beyond that, we know Christ in the Word preached and the Sacrament given, as well as in the Body gathered in the Lord's house on the Lord's Day. In the weeks and months to come, let me encourage you to consider what specific action you could take to enhance and deepen your faith in Christ and your participation in corporate worship. It may be something as simple as going to bed an hour earlier on Saturday nights, so that you are fresh and awake for Sunday worship. Whatever it is, knowing Christ in today's skeptical world is a pursuit that requires deliberate and focused action on our part.

Growing in Christ points to a Christian life of greater depth and maturity. The Christian Church throughout America is rapidly coming to grips with our own shallowness and superficiality. Pastor Bill Hybels and his staff at Willow Creek Church, one of the best-known "mega-churches" in this country, assessed its own mission and ministry about a year ago and came to this startling conclusion: they had been doing it wrongly. The lack of depth and maturity in their congregation was a startling rebuke to their lack of focus on growing in Christ. No wonder Bishop Alpha Mohammed, the now-retired Bishop of the Rift Valley in Tanzania, Africa, once described the American Church as "a vast enterprise, three thousand miles wide and two inches deep." While I don't necessarily enjoy the current distress and conflict we at Christ Church find ourselves in with the lawsuit and all of its uncomfortable dynamics, I do indeed welcome this season in our parish as a unique opportunity to grow deeper in our faith and more mature in our spirituality. Rather than succumb to the anxiety of the situation, let us pledge together to look for God's embedded grace in these days. Growing deeper and more mature in our walk with Christ is a tremendous gift we can give to one another and to this community. While we see knowing Christ most directly connected with worship, we see growing in Christ most directly connected with small groups. The communities of prayer and learning that are sprouting up in our congregation are the incubators for men and women of depth and wisdom. Through study, prayer, and good old fashioned loving one another, small groups are the means by which Christ Church will avoid the superficial Christianity that will not satisfy and by which we will plunge headlong into the powerful grace of God and His Holy Spirit. And here let me commend Ann Hallock and the women's Bible study started at her house several years ago. That faithful group has now grown, and when it expanded beyond a reasonable size for small group study, Ann encouraged other women to share the responsibility of being a host or facilitator for their video-based Bible studies. Now we have two new groups – one at Southbridge and one at the Landings – in addition to Ann's group which continues to meet in mid-town. The blessing this study has been to a number of the women of this parish is a testimony to God's promise to deepen the faith of those who are committed to growing in Christ.

Going in the name of Christ is the final element of God's vision for us. Any Christian that is serious in his or her pursuit of knowing and growing in Christ will find themselves compelled to go in Christ's name to others. We have a beautiful building here. It is a symbol of 275 years of Gospel ministry. Barring an act of God, it's not going anywhere (and neither are we for that matter). But while we have this great structural emblem, we must constantly remind ourselves that we are a congregation on the move. Christ Church members move all over the city of Savannah, the state of Georgia, the southeast, and even the world. Even now, one of our parishioners, Annisa Manzo, is in South Korea, and another, John Novikoff, is in Moscow. I firmly believe that any congregation that is not connected in ministry with what God is doing in other countries will be a congregation that is severely truncated in its understanding of who God is and what He can do. Not everyone will be individually called to travel overseas, but we are all called to value the relationships God is building between Christ Church and other Christians throughout the world. In addition, as Joey mentioned in his sermon two weeks ago, we take Christ with us "as we go." Whether it is to school, work, down the street, to the soccer field or the grocery store, we must see ourselves as ambassadors. We are salt and light, whether we want to be or not, and our lives will make a difference. The question is, will we make a difference for the Kingdom of God or something less?

Going may not take us far. Perhaps we go to the Emmaus House kitchen and help with serving 30,000 meals a year to the poor, or we involve ourselves with our Annual Tour of Homes, where we offer hospitality to thousands of guests who visit our city, or we serve on the board of Christ Church Children's School, or any number of other ministries that orbit around our congregation. Going may take us on a modest journey. Perhaps to Pass Christian, Mississippi, where we continue to come alongside the good people of Trinity Parish and their rector, the Rev. Chris Colby, in their recovery from Katrina. Maybe it takes us to Dowling Park, Florida, or

Jacksonville, to join hands with fellow Anglicans in building up the Body of Christ and establishing a new and invigorated Anglican Province in North America. There will be times that our commitment to our Anglican identity takes us on the road to serve and to be served in Christ's name.

And sometimes going takes us far away – Like the Dennisons, who now reside on the campus of Uganda Christian University, where Brian teaches law to the next generation of Ugandan leaders, or Clark and Carol Rogers Smith, who are pursuing the Lord's call on their life to be involved in serving the Body of Christ and equipping the saints for ministry – especially cross-cultural ministry. Or Susan White, who with her cohorts and supporters through Partners in Teaching, has over several years made an impact on an entire country – Belize – to the glory of God.

The question is, as we go, do we see ourselves walking in our Lord's footsteps, and fulfilling His vocation, not our own? In Luke chapter four, Jesus defined His ministry in the words of Isaiah the prophet when He said,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

As we go, we don't go simply to say we have gone. As we go, we don't go merely to meet an earthly agenda. As we go, we are called to connect earth to heaven, to bring the whole Gospel to the whole person throughout the whole world. And this is done most effectively by those who are already pursuing a life of knowing Christ and growing in Christ.

I want each one of us to take 20 seconds – only twenty seconds – to come before God and ask Him, “Lord, what would you have me do to know you better? To grow in you? To go in Your Name?” It's a simple exercise and a simple question, and I don't believe it will be fully answered in 20 seconds. But I am confident that God will speak, for I believe He has been speaking all along. We simply have not slowed down enough, focused enough, or quieted ourselves enough to listen. We are going to do that now...

Let us pray:

Lord, lead us as individuals, and as a parish, to know you. Thank you that you want to know us, and you invite us into that loving relationship of grace and faith that will transform us.

Lord help us to grow in you. Forgive us for being so shallow, so trite, and so superficial about the very matters that are so important and central to who we are and where we will spend eternity. Show us what our next step may be in growing in you.

Lord, teach us to go in Your Name. Whether it's around the block or around the world, give us a heart like yours, a heart to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to the poor, the broken, the dispossessed, the lost, the last and the least in this world.

Lord, we know who we are, because we know who You are. Now send us forth in the days, weeks, months and years to come, to live out who you have called us to be. To Your honor and glory. Amen.